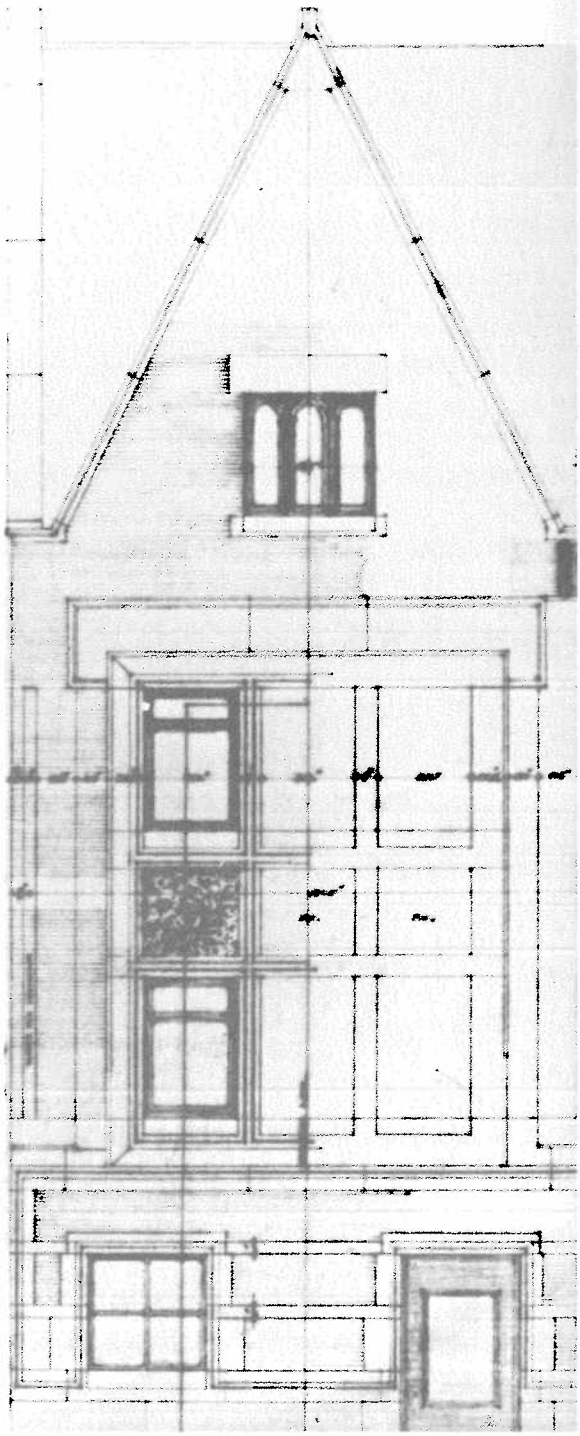
ROBERT W. ROLOSON HOUSES

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks



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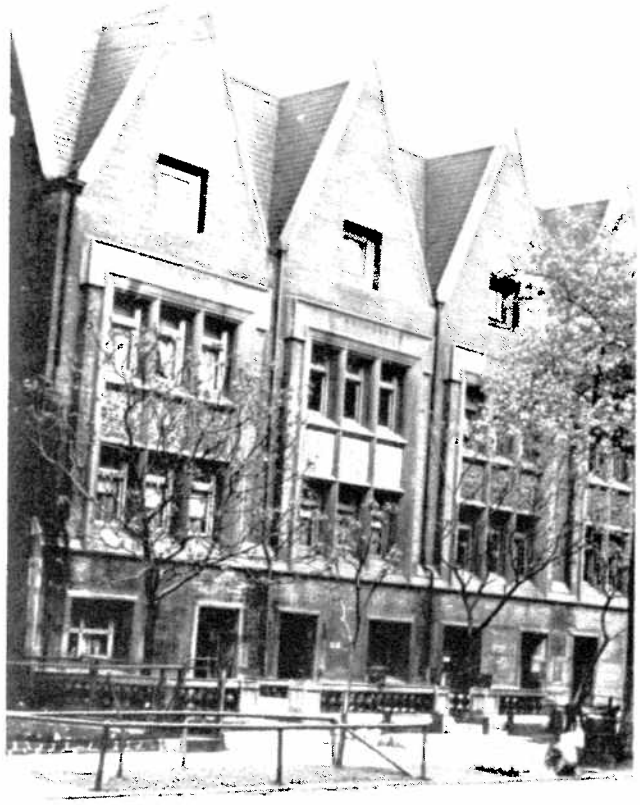
(Cover) **A detail of one elevation from the original drawings by Frank Lloyd Wright.**



The Robert W. Roloson houses.
(Gilman Lane, photographer. Courtesy of Oak Park Public Library, Oak Park, Illinois)

ROBERT W. ROLOSON HOUSES
3213-19 South Calumet Avenue
Frank Lloyd Wright, architect
Completed in 1894

Located on the South Side in the Douglas community is a group of four row houses designed in 1894 by Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect whom many have called the most imaginative of the twentieth century. Wright is primarily recognized for his Prairie school designs in the Chicago suburbs of Oak Park and River Forest. Residences built in this style are characterized by their broad projecting eaves, low roofs, powerful horizontal lines, and simple geometric shapes. Yet in the decade preceding the maturation of ideas that would culminate in the Prairie designs, Wright experimented with popular revival styles of architecture of which the Robert W. Roloson houses are an excellent example.

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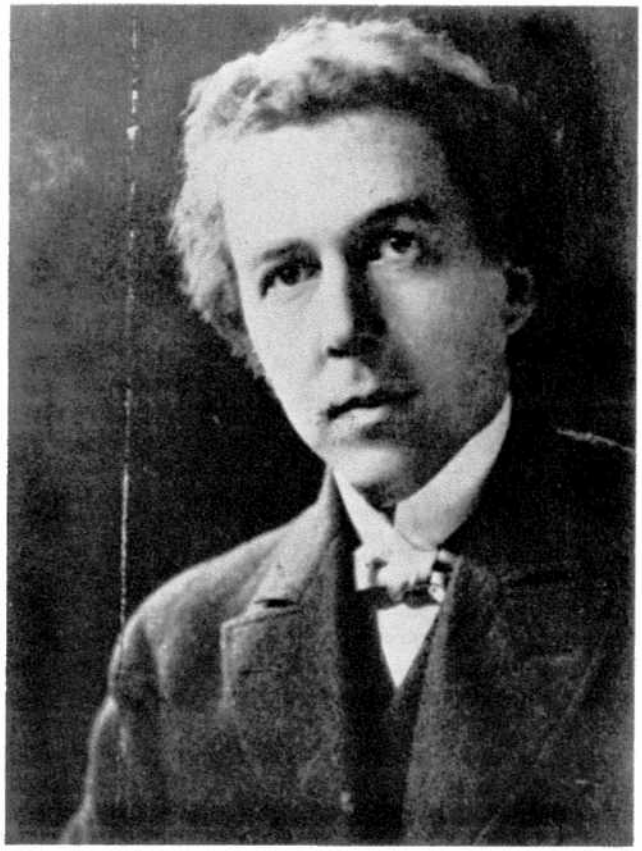
The row houses were commissioned by Robert W. Roloson, a successful grain merchant whose career began in the packing industries of the early 1870s. In time, Roloson became a member of the Chicago Board of Trade and the Chicago Stock Exchange. He was also a director of the Diamond Match Company. Roloson resided on Prairie Avenue, as did many of the era's successful merchants and businessmen. In 1882, Roloson acquired a tract of land on Calumet Avenue just south of 32nd Street. When, in 1894, he decided to improve this property with the addition of four single-family dwellings, he asked Frank Lloyd Wright to design them.

Frank Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright was born on June 8, 1867, in Richland Center, Wisconsin. In his autobiography, Wright told of his mother's determination that he should become a great architect, and of her efforts to direct him toward that goal. Despite his mother's plans for him, Wright's formal education was somewhat limited. Following the divorce of his parents in 1885, Wright took on the responsibilities of providing an income for his mother and his younger sisters. To that end, he found employment as an office boy for Allen D. Conover, a builder in nearby Madison, Wisconsin. Wright worked for Conover for more than two years. Concurrent with his employment, Wright was enrolled as a "special student" in the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Wisconsin. In his case, the term "special" indicated that he did not meet the scholastic standards for regular registration; he had never received a high school diploma.

In 1887, Wright withdrew from the university and left Madison. He moved to Chicago and found work as a draftsman in the office of Joseph Lyman Silsbee. Wright's initial contact with Silsbee had come in 1886, when Wright's uncle, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian minister, commissioned Silsbee to design the Unity Chapel at Helena, Wisconsin. Silsbee had previously designed All Souls' Church in Chicago for Jones. In order to diminish the time and expense of his own travel between Chicago and Helena, Silsbee hired Wright to supervise the chapel's construction. The final renderings also indicated Wright to be the draftsman.

The introduction to domestic architecture that the young draftsman received from Silsbee was of considerable significance in Wright's early designs. Silsbee designed many houses in what is now referred to as the Shingle style, which takes its name from the uniform covering of shingles on portions of the exterior walls. The placement of shingles in horizontal bands gives these designs an overall horizontal emphasis. Both the Shingle style and its precursor, the Queen Anne style, are characterized by their picturesque irregularities in massing and by the openness of their interior plans. Asymmetrical floor plans that produced free-flowing spaces were a significant feature of Queen Anne and Shingle style designs and constituted a major innovation in American domestic architecture, which until the late nineteenth century had been dominated by box-like room configurations.



This photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright was taken around 1889 at the time he was employed by the firm of Adler and Sullivan. (Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation)

Wright worked for Silsbee for seven or eight months before moving on to the firm of Adler and Sullivan. Wright was one of several new apprentices employed to develop drawings for the Auditorium Building (designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on September 15, 1976). Sullivan was impressed with Wright's work and allowed him unusual freedom, even permitting him to work on small portions of the Auditorium project without supervision. As a result of the success of the Auditorium, the firm received numerous commissions for commercial structures, and soon Sullivan entrusted the firm's residential designs to the very capable Wright. Among Wright's residential designs was one for a town house at 1365 North Astor Street for James Charnley in 1891. The studied geometric composition of the Charnley house (designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on August 30, 1972) made it among the boldest architectural statements of its day. One architectural historian, William A. Storrer, has called this design "a statement far beyond its time in terms of the simplicity of the ornamentation and in the way the exterior reflected interior space." Ornament is used sparingly on the facade; its most prominent use is on the balcony. The cubic massing of the exterior expresses the simplicity of the interior plan. Each floor contains two main rooms: those on the first floor being the living and

The Nathan G. Moore house as it looks today. The houses built for Moore and Roloson were the only ones designed by Wright in the Tudor Revival style. With steeply pitched gables and half-timbering, the original Moore house had a more strictly Tudor appearance when it was built in 1895. The house was partially destroyed by a fire in 1922 and the following year was rebuilt according to a new plan by Wright.
(Tim Barton, photographer)

dining rooms, and those on the second and third floors being bedrooms. A central staircase set in a screen-like series of thin oak spindles rises to the top of the house, separating the rooms on each floor. This distinctive interior feature was often used by Wright in his early works, including the Roloson houses.

Realizing that his own designs could be a source of additional income, Wright began to accept independent domestic commissions in violation of his contract with Adler and Sullivan. Between 1891 and 1893, he designed ten "bootlegged" houses, as Wright called them, in order to meet the payments that were due on the Oak Park house he had built in 1889 for himself and his new bride. The picturesque qualities of the majority of these bootlegged designs indicate the continued influence of Silsbee's Shingle style designs on the young architect. Sullivan's discovery of these projects in 1893 led to a confrontation between these two temperamental personalities that caused Wright to leave the office, never to return.

Soon after his departure, Wright established his own firm with a downtown office in Adler and Sullivan's Schiller Building (1891-92), a design for which Wright took much credit. The focus of the architect's professional and social life, however, was Oak Park. It is not surprising, then, to find that a number of Wright's earliest clients were from Oak Park and River Forest.

Soon after Wright had established his office, William H. Winslow commissioned him to design a residence in River Forest. The Winslow house is a striking design in the manner of the Charnley house. The design is in many ways formal, especially in the symmetry of the street facade. Its broad overhanging eaves and its pronounced horizontality show the origins of stylistic characteristics that would mark Wright's later Prairie school designs. The harmony of its serene design, coupled with its wooded setting, inspired Mrs. Edward Waller, who lived opposite the Winslow house for almost fifty years, to comment that she never grew tired of looking at it.

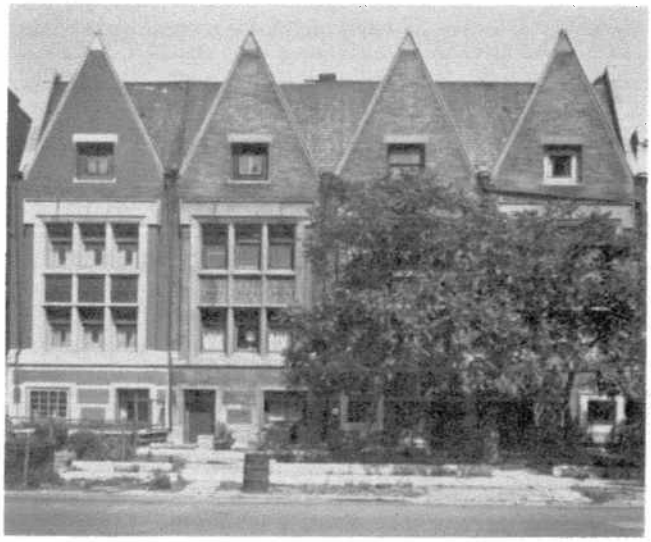
This was no idle admiration for the architect's work because Edward Waller proved to be one of the principal clients in Wright's Oak Park years. It was for Waller that Wright designed the now demolished Francisco Terrace Apartments in Chicago, and in 1905 it was Waller who obtained for Wright the opportunity to showcase his decorative talents in the remodeling of the lobby of Burnham and Root's Rookery Building (designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on July 5, 1972). In 1894, Waller's daughter married the son of Robert W. Roloson, the man for whom Wright designed the four town houses that same year.

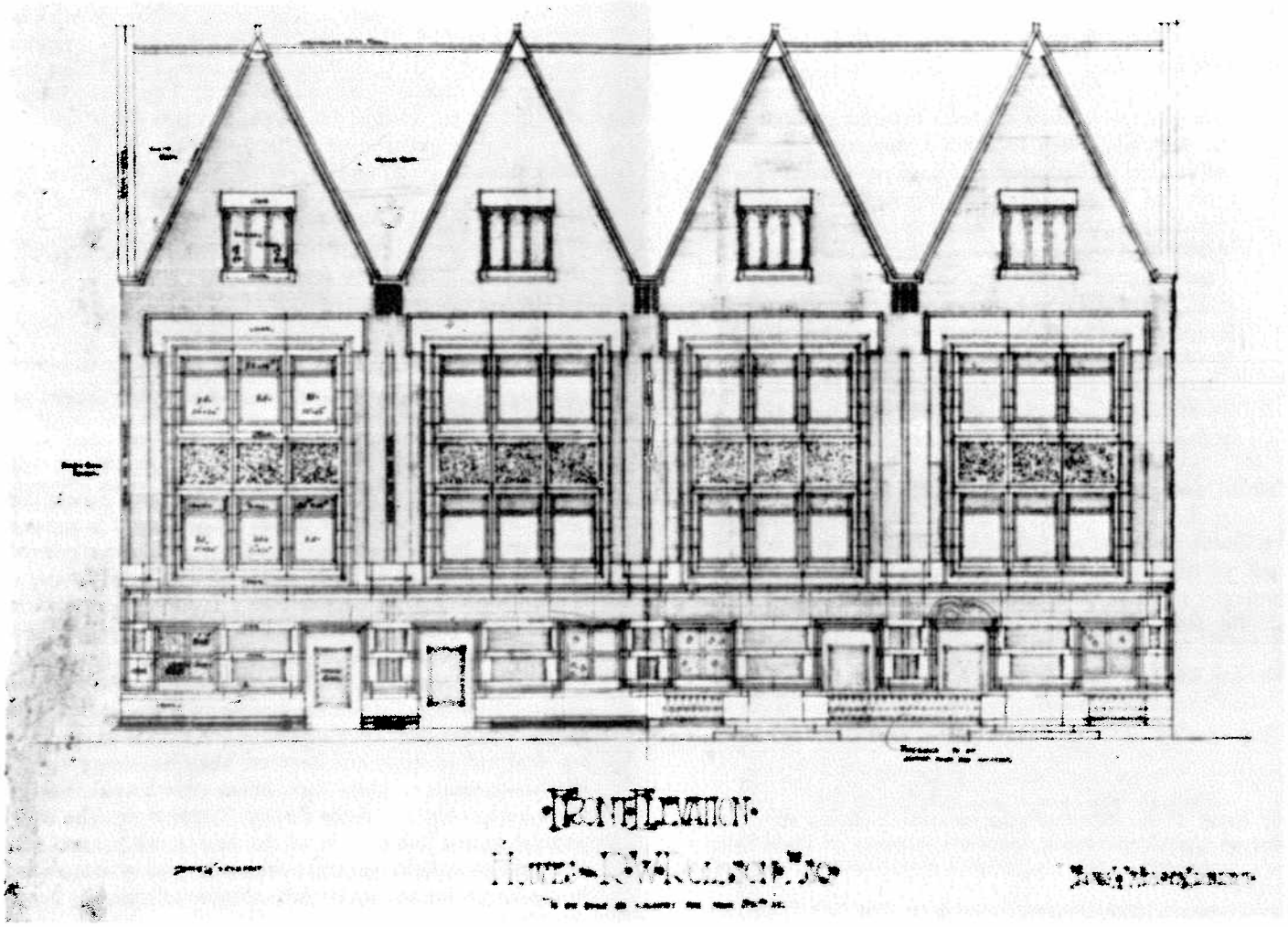
The Roloson Houses

In the commission for the Roloson houses, Wright was confronted with the problem of designing four houses that would make maximum use of the lot and result in a monetary return to Roloson. The client may also have stipulated that the design had to be in harmony with other houses in the community. Douglas was then a fashionable residential community whose architecture was dominated by the popular revival styles of the late nineteenth century, such as the Italianate, Queen Anne, and Romanesque.

Wright's design for the row houses exhibits the influence of Silsbee's predilliction for picturesque revival styles. They are designed in what architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock refers to as the Jacobethan revival style, which is more commonly called the English Tudor style. The style, popular in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, is characterized by steep-sided triangular gables and rectangular windows divided by heavy stone mullions.

So far as is known, the Roloson houses are the only row houses designed by Wright that were actually constructed.
(Richard Nickel, photographer. Courtesy of Richard Nickel Committee)





This line drawing of the front elevation is taken from the original drawings done in red and purple ink on tracing linen. The buildings were constructed exactly as drawn with the exception of the attic windows: a common two-part casement replaced the three-panel arrangement shown here. In 1914, the plans were damaged by water during a fire at Taliesin, Wright's home in Spring Green, Wisconsin.

In front of each house originally was a paved terrace enclosed by a low wall composed of limestone piers and coping and spherical terra-cotta balusters. The lower half of each sphere was patterned with curvilinear leaves and buds, a motif often found in the works of Louis Sullivan. Wright used a similar design one year later in a set of balusters he designed for the Nathan G. Moore house in Oak Park. The original Roloson balusters have since been removed.

The four-story facade of each structure is of buff-colored roman brick, highlighted with dressed limestone. The ground story features a large square window and doorway. Both are deeply recessed, a characteristic utilized by the architect in his design for the Winslow house the preceding year. The windows at the second and third stories are articulated by limestone mullions and set into a limestone frame. The spandrel between the second and third levels is embellished with Sullivanesque terra-cotta ornament. A deeply set window is located at the attic level. The attic is capped with a slate gable roof. A transverse gable, which extends across the width of all four structures, intersects the front gable of each house to unify the roof lines of all four. The roof behind this transverse gable is flat.

The style of ornament employed by Wright on the Roloson houses is particularly noteworthy. Wright's mature ornament was rectilinear and geometric. In contrast, the forms used in the Roloson houses are reminiscent of the stylized twisting and curving foliage that were such an integral part of the work of Wright's mentor, Louis Sullivan. In his earliest independent commissions, Wright adopted a less stylized but equally dense version of these forms. A case in point is the decorative panel that Wright designed for the front door of the Winslow house. Its luxuriant branching foliage is of an ornamental type rarely seen in the architect's later works. The ornament on the spandrels of the Roloson houses is remarkably similar to this door panel.

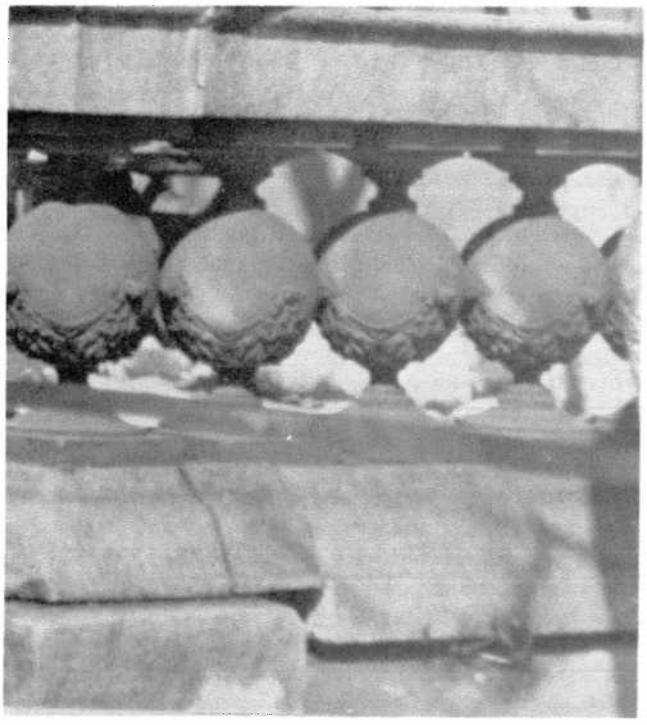
In his earliest commissions, Wright generally used popular revival styles, including the Tudor style, as a point of departure for his own developing ideas on geometric

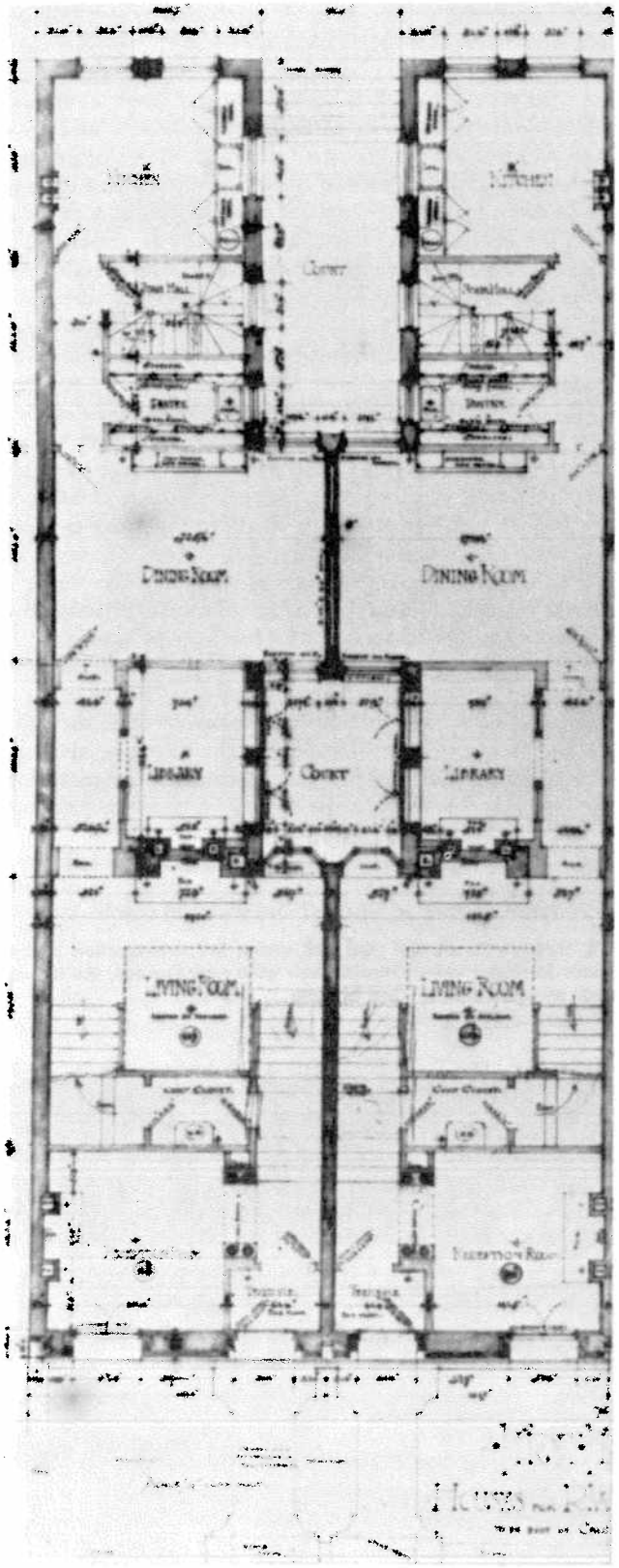
massing. Regarding the facade of the Roloson houses, Grant Carpenter Manson writes in his book, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910:*

> Everything seems to conform to some geometric principle which stills the customary clamor of so rich an historical style; we are conscious only of a very disciplined composition of squares surmounted by the single triangle of the gable. The only applied ornament is the set of three foliated spandrels of each facade, beautifully controlled and adapted to their square shape....The Roloson houses are an extraordinary manifestation of Wright's power to transmute what he touches into something peculiarly his own, even when he starts with an unfamiliar borrowed style.

Despite Manson's statement, the Tudor style was not totally unfamiliar to Wright. The architect employed traces of the Tudor style and associated Gothic detail in several designs for Adler and Sullivan as well as in his own early independent commissions. The design for the Roloson houses was the first to incorporate these Tudor elements in an overall design. As such, the Roloson houses were the precedent for Wright's other entirely Tudor design, the previously mentioned Moore house.

This detail of the balustrade that once enclosed the terrace in front of each house demonstrates the influence of Louis Sullivan's ornamental designs on Wright's own developing style of ornament.
(Grant Manson, photographer. Courtesy of Oak Park Public Library, Oak Park, Illinois. Grant C. Manson Collection)





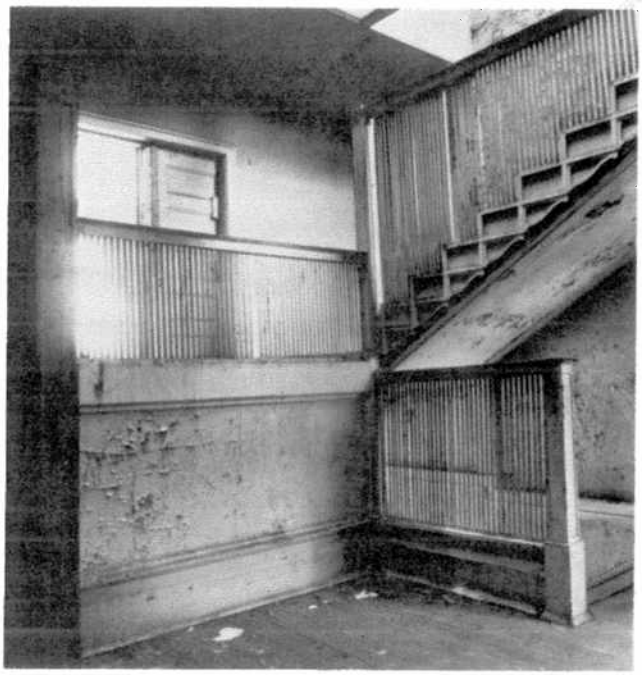
A plan of the two northernmost houses showing the reception room on the ground floor and the arrangement of the main rooms on the first floor. A drawing room is located on the mezzanine immediately above the reception room.
(Copyright © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation 1979)

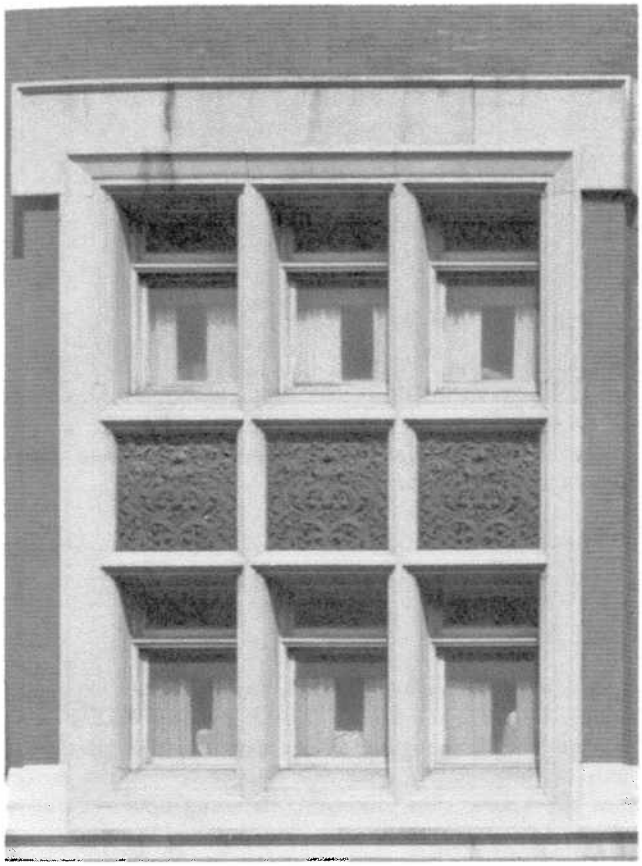
The crowning achievement of the design of the Roloson houses is the interior plan. Each house is laid out on a mezzanine principle so that, as one enters any of the structures, one goes past a reception room, up three steps, continues past a doorway leading to the basement stairs, and up a small flight of stairs to the central stair hall, or living room, on the first floor. An arched passageway leads to a library, dining room, pantry, rear staircase, and kitchen. A drawing room is located at the front of the house, a half-floor above the first floor. The second floor contains four bedrooms and a bath, and a fifth bedroom is located under the front gable.

The houses are built in pairs around two central light courts that are surfaced with white glazed brick. A large skylight above the central stair hall of each house also provides illumination. This stair hall is the most distinctive feature of each plan. Like the staircase of the Charnley house, it is defined by a screen-like series of tall, thin, closely set balusters of square oak dowels positioned at forty-five degree angles to the plane of the balustrade. The stair hall rises to the skylight and opens the interior space, demonstrating Wright's mastery of spatial effects and relieving the compactness often associated with narrow row houses.

The woodwork of the stair hall is typical of the fine craftsmanship found in Wright's houses. The same high quality of workmanship is seen in the woodwork throughout the Roloson houses, including the fireplace mantels. Each of the houses had fireplaces located in the reception

This view of the central stair hall shows the deterioration of the houses in recent years. Despite their poor maintenance, the houses retain many of their original features.
(Courtesy of John Vinci)

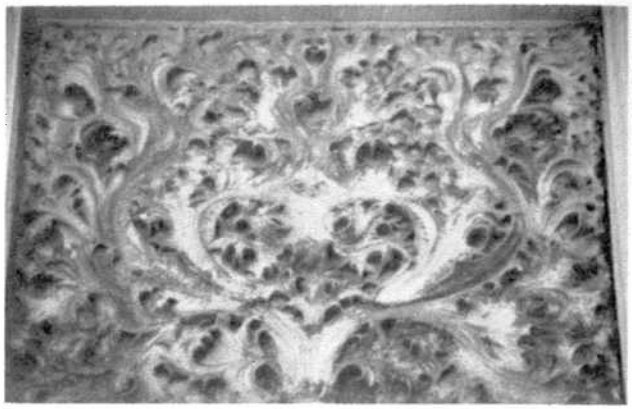




A detail of the limestone frame around the second- and third-floor windows.
(Richard Nickel, photographer. Courtesy of Richard Nickel Committee)

room on the ground floor, the library and stair hall of the first floor, the drawing room on the mezzanine level, and in the master bedroom on the second floor at the front of the house. Some of these mantels have been removed; most of them do, however, remain. Craftsmanship is also exhibited in a screen of round spindles that fills the upper half of a wall separating the library from the hallway. These spindles are fluted at the top and bottom. Ionic columns with finely executed capitals are located on either side of the library entrance. In addition to this woodwork, two of the houses still have their original built-in dining room sideboards. Built-in buffets and bookcases were standard features of late nineteenth-century houses. Wright took advantage of this custom to design furnishings whose scale and proportions were sympathetic to the interior spaces of his houses.

One other notable feature of the Roloson design is the windows. Diamond-patterned leaded glass was used extensively throughout the houses. Clear panes of leaded glass were used in the transoms above the second and third floor windows of the street facade, in the attic and ground floor windows, and in the front door. Colored glass was used in the windows overlooking the light courts in order to insure the privacy of the residents of the houses while also providing illumination. Most of the windows in the Roloson



A detail of the terra-cotta spandrel ornament found on each house. (Donald G. Kalec, photographer)

houses were double-hung. Some, however, were casements, anticipating Wright's use of them in his later Prairie school designs. Wright thought that casement windows were analogous to outstretched arms that opened to pull the outside into the house, thus promoting harmony between a structure and its environment.

The Roloson houses were maintained in their original condition for a relatively brief period of time. The houses were built in the period when the community reached its zenith, but in the early 1900s the area began to decline. Middle-class families began to move to newer and more prestigious areas of the city. Apartment buildings replaced older single-family dwellings, and the houses that remained were subdivided for use by the poorer families who began to settle in the community. The Roloson houses were no exception. They too were subdivided and used as apartments for a number of years. A change in their surroundings occurred in the 1920s when the City Council passed a resolution to widen what was then called South Park Way (now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive). The widening necessitated the demolition of the west half of the block on which the Roloson houses stand, leaving the rear of the property exposed to the boulevard.

The structures suffered from many years of neglect and abuse. By the late 1930s these houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright had long been forgotten. They were rediscovered in 1940 by architectural historian and critic Grant Carpenter Manson. Unfortunately, deterioration did not stop at this time. Today many of the original details are missing. Gone are the original terra-cotta balusters, the leaded-glass windows, and some of the interior woodwork. What has survived are the most significant features: the facade and the interior plan. The design of the Robert W. Roloson houses makes many allusions to influences on the young Frank Lloyd Wright, but the dynamic spatial effects and careful massing of the facade handled so expertly by the young architect are of a quality that prefigures his mature works.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.